

## Early Care & Education Rates are Low for Maltreated Children in Los Angeles County

A conservative estimate of 12.8% (1,509) of the DCFS caseload under age five, 11,778 as of October 2011, attend public early care and education programs, including Head Start/Early Head Start and subsidized child care/preschool.

Children involved in the child welfare system are the most at-risk for developmental delays, poor academic success, and socioemotional issues—all of which early education services can help mitigate or ameliorate, especially for children from low-income families. High quality early learning experiences can positively alter a child's life course, contribute to family stability, and reduce public assistance and intervention costs.

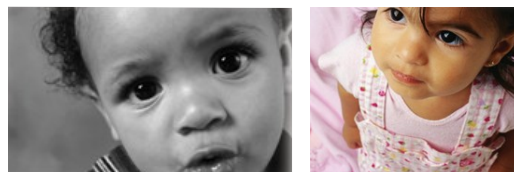
The majority of maltreated young children have experienced neglect—highlighting the too-often immediate and grave consequences of growing up in poverty and under-resourced communities. Furthermore, if a child is removed from the home for any reason, these children have their developmental trajectory further altered by the toxic stress of environmental and caregiver instability layered onto the trauma of maltreatment.

### **Child welfare and early care and education advocates must work together to ensure the well-being of the most at-risk children by increasing their access to early care and education services.**

All children under DCFS supervision should be categorically eligible and prioritized for child care and development services based on current California law as children who are abused/neglected and receiving protective services OR as children who are significantly at-risk of future abuse. They are not receiving these services for a wide variety of implementation barriers due to vague and confusing policies.

**Currently, only 2.13% of children receiving state subsidized early care and education services in LA County do so because they are receiving protective services.**

This is no higher than the rate of maltreated young children in California or LA County overall and indicative of unsuccessful identification and prioritization policies and practices for state subsidized care. Furthermore, only 131 identified at-risk children in LA County were served outside of DCFS's state-contracted child care voucher program in October 2011 through state-subsidized programs.



### **High quality early learning programs support three key child welfare goals: safety, permanency, and well-being.**

**Safety.** Observing and responding to early warning signs of child abuse or neglect, or other child-related risk factors for abuse such as developmental delays, socioemotional and behavioral issues, and health issues, in addition to parent or caregiver respite.

**Permanency.** Provide stable, caring access points for children and parents/caregivers to child and family support services from local community based organizations without the traditional stigma of child welfare.

**Child well-being.** Promoting the socioemotional development and school readiness of children most at-risk for academic delays and poor psychosocial development, and providing and facilitating stable and responsive relationships with caring adults (teachers, service providers, parents, caregivers etc.).

## **Disjointed policy hinders collaboration between child welfare and early care and education systems. Still, adopting the following practices will support synchronized efforts, leading to greater child well-being.**

### **Institute education and developmental need assessments in child welfare case planning.**

Federal child welfare reporting requirements do not mandate education needs assessments for young children under child welfare supervision before they are school-age. Children may then be receiving early care and education services that do not identify or prioritize maltreated or at-risk children, and neither are child welfare agencies necessarily aware of their enrollment.

### **Identify families with children most at-risk and ensure access to high quality learning programs.**

The high overlap of families receiving CalWORKS and those involved with child welfare (up to 87% of child welfare caseloads) shows that families receiving income-based services are not identified or tracked as families with children at-risk of abuse or neglect. Accurately identifying children most in need of high quality early learning services (i.e. families who are involved with public assistance and child welfare departments) becomes especially important as available resources continue to shrink for all families.

### **Target enrollment efforts at the local level to maximize utilization of all available resources.**

Federal Head Start/Early Head Start programs use clearer identification and enrollment policies, yet the mix of priority populations for local programs create inconsistent access for children in the child welfare system. For example, 8% of eligible young children in foster care in LA County were enrolled in the 4 largest Head Start programs in 2011—just above the national average of 6% enrollment of children in foster care in Head Start programs, but indicating the potential for success in targeted enrollment efforts at the local level.

### **Increase cross-system collaborative efforts to build comprehensive early learning environments.**

Program quality variability and the overall shortage of high-quality early learning spaces in California limit the ability to link at-risk children to high-quality programs that meet the needs of children in the child welfare system with high incidences of developmental delays and socioemotional and behavioral issues.

## **State and federal policy needs to be revised to effectively prioritize young children who are perilously at-risk for abuse and neglect and those who are already in the child welfare system.**

### **Policy Priority 1**

All maltreated and significantly at-risk children under child welfare supervision should be identified and referred by child welfare workers and given enrollment priority in high quality public ECE programs. Policies that achieve this will align with safety and permanency efforts by providing respite and workforce support to parents and caregivers, and will promote child well-being by addressing the significant developmental risks.



### **Policy Priority 2**

Scale up best-practices (including Head Start/Early Head Start models for collaboration and referral) through policies that remove barriers to collaboration and coordination between early care and education systems and child welfare systems. This will promote consistency of care and ultimately enhance efforts to ensure safe, stable environments for children and align policies for young children with policies for school-age children.

### **Policy Priority 3**

Build high-quality ECE systems, which meet the dual goals of prevention and early intervention, by working in tandem with child welfare, public health, mental health, education, and family support agencies to ensure the safety, permanency, and the well-being of all young children at-risk while enrolled in ECE and beyond.